

Creating Illegitimacy. Marriage, Motherhood and Conflicting Moralities in Northwest Namibia

Julia Pauli¹

¹Hamburg University, Institute of Social Anthropology, Hamburg, Germany

julia.pauli@uni-hamburg.de

As elsewhere in Southern Africa, during the past four decades the institution of marriage has been substantially altered in the rural community of Fransfontein, Northwest Namibia. While until the end of the 1960s it was common to be married, since the 1970s the number of people marrying has steadily declined. Currently, only about 30 percent of the population 15 years and older is or has ever been married. Related to these changes in marriage, the number of children born out-of-wedlock has significantly increased. In 2004, 85 percent of all births in the Fransfontein region throughout the last sixty years have been out-of-wedlock births. Nevertheless, stigmatization of children born out-of-wedlock is not yet widespread in Fransfontein. Comparable to other regions of Southern Africa the birth of a child is still very much valued and welcomed independent of the parent's marital status. To differentiate children born within and outside marriage, until now descriptive and not pejorative terms are common. Children born to a married couple are called *!game /gôan* in the region's language Khoekhoegowab, i.e. 'marriage children', or 'inside marriage children'. Children born out-of-wedlock are called *!gameb !auka /gôan*, 'outside marriage children'. However, these perceptions are gradually changing. During Sunday mass in the local Protestant church the term */ai-/gôan*, 'sin child', is becoming more common to name children born out-of-wedlock. Further, inheritance rights of children born out-of-wedlock are increasingly contested. Slowly, yet steadily, a moral and legal discourse of 'illegitimate' children is being created. The contribution will trace these developments and discuss their entanglements with changing notions of marriage, mother- and womanhood.